



Costa Rica 2016 Crime & Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Theft; Burglary; Rape/Sexual Violence; Murder; Financial Security; Fraud; Information Security; Drug Trafficking; Riots/Civil Unrest; Earthquakes; Volcanoes; Floods; Maritime; Disease Outbreak

Western Hemisphere > Costa Rica; Western Hemisphere > Costa Rica > San Jose; Western Hemisphere > Costa Rica > Santa Cruz

4/18/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Post Crime Rating: High

Crime Threats

Crime is a significant concern in Costa Rica, and it has steadily increased over the past few years. While the vast majority of visitors do not become victims of crime, all are potential targets for criminals. Petty theft crimes remain the main problem, although armed robberies have been known to occur even in broad daylight. The majority of crime and safety threats to U.S. official and private communities are acts of theft. Thefts are very common in highly populated and tourist areas. Types of theft that commonly occur are vehicle burglaries, smash-and-grabs, home robberies, pickpocketing, mugging, and purse/wallet snatching. Serious crimes against visitors (armed robberies, sexual assaults, murders), although less frequent, do occur.

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The most widely used indicator of crime is the homicide rate, which reached a record high in 2015. There were 566 murders, marking a 20 percent increase over the 471 murders registered in 2014. The murder rate was approximately 11.5 per 100,000 inhabitants by the end of 2015, surpassing the threshold of 10 per 100,000 that the World Health Organization considers to be an endemic level of homicide.

Criminals have targeted rental vehicles. A tactic used by criminals is to puncture the tires of rental vehicles and then follow the car until the driver pulls over to inspect. The criminals under the guise of being Good Samaritans will approach the vehicle to assist with changing the tire and, in the process, steal the tourist's personal items.

Credit card theft/fraud is also a common crime faced by visitors. Many victims maintain physical possession of their card, but their credit card information is stolen and later used without their knowledge.

Passport theft is also a big issue for visiting American citizens.

Sex tourism is common, especially in the tourist areas, specifically, the coastal areas. Tourists who engage in/solicit prostitution exponentially increase their chances of being a victim of theft or violent robbery.

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Organized crime groups are of significant concern. Both Costa Rican nationals and third county nationals participate in organized crime: car theft rings, drug traffickers, petty thieves, and burglars. Porous borders allow the country to be utilized to traffic drugs and other contraband.

Many crimes against private sector organizations are motivated by retribution of a former employee.

Areas of Concern

While crimes occur throughout Costa Rica, they are more prevalent in certain locations, including popular tourist destinations, and at certain times during the year (Christmas holiday season). There is generally a spike in the number of home burglaries and robberies during the holiday season.

In regards to regional travel concerns, the downtown area of San José is a prime tourist destination during daylight hours. Visitors are strongly encouraged not to go there after dark and are advised to avoid the El Pueblo Centro Comercial area of San José at all times. U.S. government officials are not permitted to stay in hotels in downtown San José due to safety concerns.

Limon and Tamarindo and the surrounding destinations have been primary areas of concern for the U.S. Embassy.

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In the Caribbean port city of Limon, host government authorities are working to counter the activities of organized criminal elements involved in drug trafficking and human trafficking.

The tourist hub of Tamarindo, located in the Pacific province of Guanacaste, attracts opportunistic criminals engaged in burglary, robbery, and the sale of narcotics.

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Driving can be extremely challenging to the most experienced driver. Roads are often in poor condition, and large potholes are common and could cause severe damage to vehicles. Traffic laws and speed limits are often ignored, turn signals are rarely used, passing on dangerous stretches of highway is common, and pedestrians are not given the right-of-way. Heavy traffic provides the opportunity for thieves to steal property that is left in plain view from vehicles. Another challenge confronting drivers is the lack of street signs/names, making finding an address extremely difficult even with a GPS.

In downtown San José, the government has imposed a law restricting cars from operating on certain days of the week. The last number on a vehicle's license plate determines which days it can operate. This tactic has proven to relieve some of the traffic congestion.

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Motorcyclists commonly drive without respect to rules of the road, often passing on the right, weaving in/out without warning, and creating lanes where none officially exist. The fatality rate for pedestrians and bicyclists and motorcyclists is high.

The traffic police are not proactive and do not regularly monitor the roads; they mainly respond to traffic accidents. If involved in an accident, the law states that you must keep your vehicle in the place where the accident occurred until the insurance company and traffic police reports to the scene, which could take hours. Visitors who plan to self-drive should be aware that the government may prevent any driver involved in a vehicular accident from departing Costa Rica until all injury claims have been settled. This is true regardless of whether the driver is at fault or covered by insurance. The courts often delay imposing a settlement until all injured parties have fully recovered and the definitive costs are known. Travelers may be prevented from leaving the country for months, or even years, until a local judicial resolution is reached.

Driving outside of San José at night can be treacherous. Roads often lack adequate lighting, guardrails, and street signs. During the rainy season (May-November), landslides and washed out roads are common.

Public Transportation Conditions

Visitors are advised to use taxi cabs from reputable companies. Officially registered taxis will be red or orange with a yellow triangle on the side door. The triangle will include a designated number that matches the number on the taxis license plate.

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Terrorism Threat

Post Terrorism Rating: Low

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Costa Rica has a long tradition of stable democracy. The country has not had military since 1948, and prides itself on its peaceful nature.

Post Political Violence Rating: Low

Civil Unrest

There is no history of violent civil unrest. Protests occur in the heavily-populated areas on occasion; they are generally peaceful. Protests frequently center on fair pay and working conditions. That said, all protests should be avoided. To avoid perception of interfering in local politics, Americans should avoid protests. The Constitution bars foreigners from political activity, and foreigners involved with protests, even peaceful ones, could be arrested.

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Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Costa Rica is located in an active earthquake and volcanic zone. The last large earthquake occurred in September 2012, with a magnitude of 7.6. It was one of the largest earthquakes recorded in Costa Rican history but caused limited damage, considering its size.

Serious flooding occurs annually in the Caribbean province of Limón and the Pacific province of Puntarenas, and flash floods and severe landslides occur in other province as well, depending on the time of year and rainfall.

When planning travel to the area, consider that a disaster may strike without warning. General information about natural disaster preparedness is available from the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and from the Center of Disease Control and Prevention.

U.S. citizen drownings represent an important danger. On both the Caribbean and Pacific coasts, currents are swift and dangerous, and the majority of beaches have neither lifeguards nor warning signs. These rip currents have swept even strong swimmers out to sea. Visitors should carefully consider the safety of any beach before entering the water. Visitors are urged to always exercise extreme caution when swimming in the ocean and to never swim alone.

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There are many scenic areas where a small incident may become life-threatening due to the rugged terrain or remote location. In recent years, foreign visitors, including two U.S. citizens, have disappeared while hiking or traveling in national parks. Life-threatening fauna, such as jaguars, pumas, wild pigs, and poisonous snakes are common in some of these parks, especially in densely-wooded areas.

Drug-related Crimes

Costa Rica's strategic location, porous borders, limited security forces, and thinly-patrolled waters make it a major transit and temporary storage country for illicit drugs. A 20 percent rise in the homicide rate from 2014 to 2015 has focused the people and government on the increased presence of illegal drugs, greater domestic consumption, and associated turf wars. The government steadily increased its spending on law enforcement agencies and improved its focus on counter-narcotics programs, largely through strong security cooperation with the U.S. government. The recent accomplishments in Costa Rica's counter-narcotics programs can partially be attributed to the improvements in equipment, training, and infrastructure projects provided by the U.S. government.

Kidnapping Threat

The kidnapping rate is very low and rarely involves U.S. citizens. The majority of kidnappings are a result of feuds between rival criminal organizations.

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Police Response

Police response can be obtained by calling 911; however, response times may vary due to the lack of manpower and vehicles.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

U.S. citizens who are detained by the police will be given the opportunity to contact friends or family. Those detained by law enforcement should immediately contact the U.S. Embassy at 2519-2000. Harassment is not common with foreigners, but should it occur, report the incident to the U.S. Embassy.

Crime Victim Assistance

A crime in action should be reported to Fuerza Publica. To have a crime investigated/prosecuted, it must be reported to Organismo de Investigación (OIJ), the investigative police.

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Police emergency - 911

Ambulance - 911

Fire - 911

OIJ – 911, 2295-3639, or 2295-3640

Tourist Police – 2586-4620, 2586-4287, 2586-4457, 2586-4458 or 2586-4143

Police/Security Agencies

Fuerza Publica: Uniformed police agency. Performs ground security, law enforcement, counter-narcotics, and border patrol functions. This agency is within the Ministry of Public Security.

Organismo de Investigación (OIJ): Agency that investigates all crimes for prosecution. This agency is within the Poder Judicial (judicial branch).

Policía de Transito: Transit police enforces traffic laws and responds to all traffic accidents. This agency is within the Ministry of Transportation and Public Works.

Directorate de Inteligencia y Seguridad (DIS): Costa Rica's intelligence agency, within the Ministry of the President.

Unidad Especial de Intervención (UEI): Special weapons and tactics police unit, specializing in explosives. Is a special unit within DIS.

Migración: Controls immigration at the borders, ports, and airports, within the Ministry of

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Governorship and Police.

Medical Emergencies

Medical care in San José is adequate. U.S. medical insurance is not always accepted, and most hospitals will require payment up front for services.

Red Cross Ambulance -911

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

San José

Hospital CIMA* - 2208-1000

Hospital Mexico - 2242-6700

Hospital Clinica Biblica* - 2522-1000

Hospital Calderon Guardia - 2212-1000

National Children's Hospital (Hospital Nacional de Ninos) – 2246-3000

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Hospital Clínica Católica (Private) San Antonio de Guadalupe – San José –2246-3000

Hospital Metropolitano (private & Services U.S. Veterans) - San José, principle headquarters:
+ (506) 2521-6565

*CIMA and Clinica Biblica, will require payment up-front for non-emergency care.

Puntarenas: Hospital Monseñor Sanabria - 2630-8000

Limón: Tony Facio Hospital - 2758-2222

Guanacaste: Enrique Baltodano Hospital - 2690-2300

Ciudad Nelly (Closet to Panama): Hospital Ciudad Nelly – 2785-9600

Nicoya: Hospital Anexion – 2685-8400

Los Chiles: Hospital Los Chiles – 2471-2000

San Carlos: Hospital de San Carlos – 2460-1176

Cartago: Hospital Max Peralta – 2550-1999

Perez Zeledon: Hospital Escalante Padilla – 2785-0700

Alajuela: Hospital San Rafael de Alajuela – 2436-1000

Heredia: Hospital San Vicente de Paul – 2562-8100, 2261-9971

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Recommended Insurance Posture

Supplemental medical insurance with specific overseas coverage, including a provision for medical evacuation, has been useful in many emergencies. The Embassy recommends visitors consider purchasing private air medical insurance before traveling.

CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

The U.S. Centers of Disease Control issued updated guidance on the Zika virus on February 1, 2016, that adds Costa Rica to the list of countries that have ongoing cases of Zika transmission.

Costa Rica does not require any vaccinations prior to travelling; however, travelers are required to show proof of their yellow fever vaccination when arriving from a country with risk of yellow fever. For vaccine and health guidance, please visit the CDC at: http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/costa-rica?s_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-single-001.

OSAC Country Council Information

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Embassy San Jose has a growing OSAC Country Council. Regional Security Officer Karl Bultrowicz is the point of contact for all OSAC issues and can be reached at 506-2519-2313 and via e-mail at BultrowiczK@state.gov. Monthly meetings are held at the American Chamber of Commerce. To reach OSAC's Western Hemisphere team, please email OSACWHA@state.gov.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

U.S. Embassy San José, Costa Rica Calle 98 Via 104, Pavas, San José, Costa Rica, in front of Centro Comercial del Oeste Pavas, Costa Rica.

Business Hours: Mon-Fri, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Embassy Contact Numbers

Switchboard: 2519-2000

RSO Office: 2519-2313

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American Citizens Services Section: 2519-2590

Consular Visa Inquiries: 4000-1976

Website: <http://costarica.usembassy.gov/>

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Scams

Real estate scams are prevalent. If looking to purchase real estate, please ensure that you are using a reputable real estate company and lawyer.

Situational Awareness Best Practices

All travelers and long-term visitors are encouraged to exercise the same level of caution as they would in any major U.S. city. Maintain awareness of your surroundings. Do not walk alone at night. Do not leave your bags unattended in public, and maintain a low profile. Be extremely cautious when carrying bags or when you have valuables in your pockets. Do not carry large amounts of cash/valuables on your person. If confronted by a thief, do not resist. Try to stay calm, give the perpetrator what they want, and they are unlikely to hurt you. Most victims of theft are injured when they try to fight back.

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Tourists should make an effort to store luggage and other personal items out of plain view and ensure that car doors are locked.

Use a well-secured safe or lockbox wherever you stay. Make locking the doors to your home, hotel, and vehicle a habit. Tourists are encouraged to leave passports in hotel safes or other secure locations. Make a photocopy of the biographical and entry stamp pages in lieu of carrying your passport.

Remain vigilant and watchful of your employees. Do not trust everyone with sensitive information. Also, take precaution when severing the employment of an employee. Ensure that all local employment laws are followed and that the employees receive their legally-mandated severance compensation. If running a business, invest in an effective security system for your office space. This should include an alarm system, physical security enhancements to doors/windows, and an effective guard service.

Business travelers are cautioned to avoid becoming targets by limiting overt displays of wealth and maintaining a low profile. Travelers are also advised to limit their travel to established, frequently-visited areas in order to avoid "wrong place-wrong time" scenarios. If you plan to visit an unfamiliar area, you should consult with a trustworthy local (a concierge, a licensed tour guide, etc.) regarding precautions or concerns.

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